"A Few Words of Farewell to a Friend"

This funeral oration was delivered for Walter Bauer, poet, writer and teacher, who died on December 23, 1976

FAREWELL, WALTER

It was Walter's expressed wish that I should speak on this occasion "to say a few words of farewell to a friend". I never thought that I should ever have to perform that service, and I wish it were not so. To me, as to many of us, Walter Bauer, whether as teacher, writer or friend, had somehow become ageless over a decade ago. The ceaseless energy with which he laboured in the garden of his craft, and the radiant serenity that seemed to be at the centre of him, suggested permanence. And here we are, Walter, to bid you farewell.

I still cannot believe that he shall no longer be with us. Only a week ago it is that my phone rang in Montreal and his dear friend and companion Arden told me that he was dying of a cancer in Sunnybrook Hospital. As I drove through the night, fragments of past conversations with him and shared experiences kept wheeling through my head rejecting the terrible news. But the truth was only too apparent when I entered his hospital room. Death had drawn his features almost beyond recognition, certainly beyond hope. And he knew it and had come to accept it. That morning, less than 24 hours before he passed away, the last words he wrested from the stranglehold of the disease were: "I am dying". I knew then that I had come to bid farewell to my dearest friend.

Ten days earlier he had walked into hospital, tired and exhausted, but to all appearances the picture of health that he always was, prepared for a short stay to rest and recuperate, no more. Certainly he did not expect to die then. He was full of plans for books he was going to write. We had discussed some of them only a month earlier in Montreal. And yesterday I found on his desk a slip of paper outlining his future projects under the heading:

"For the next three years in English":
Poems from a University
Log-book
Journal: the twentieth year
In a Quiet Country (play)
Old Houses must Go (novel
Pushkin (play) . . . etc.

– and at the bottom:

"A Canadian Dance of Death".

Sooner than he and anyone else expected, death has now led him his dance. And so we bid farewell, Walter.

Not as though he didn't know that some day his hour would strike. On another slip of paper (there are hundreds of these on his desk, with quotations from everything he has read, and observations of his own) it says: "Life is a fatal adventure. It can only have one end. So why not make it as far reaching and free as possible." And that is just what Walter did. Literally from under the table of a labourer's home (he was a latecomer, the fifth child, and there was neither chair nor room for him at the table) he reached out far across Europe and the Atlantic ocean here to this metropolis. His adventure took him through the famine and sufferings of the twenties, the Nazi nightmare of the thirties and its violent and horrible explosion in the Second World War, and reached a free port here in Toronto where he started a new life 24 years ago, working his way up in true immigrant style from dishwasher to university professor. But I shall not rehearse his biography. We who are his friends know, at least in general outline, and we have come to bid Walter farewell.

We know also that it was not only the geographic and social adventure that was "far reaching and free", but also the adventure of the mind, of the imagination, that

made him a major writer of our time. It was an adventure into which he threw himself every day of his life with staggering discipline. Another slip on his desk reads: "If you are poor, work. If you are rich, continue to work. If you are happy, keep on working. If disappointments come, work. If sorrow overwhelms you and loved ones do not seem to be true, work. If your health is threatened, work. When faith falters and reason fails, work. When dreams are shattered and hope seems dead, work. Work as if your life was in peril: it really is." This is the motto of every great artist and could be duplicated from many periods and many places. It was Rodin's advice to the young Rilke: "Travailler, toujours travailler!" Because work is the means by which the adventures of the imagination are made real and permanent. It is the only way that any writer could create, as Walter has, over sixty books – poetry, plays, novels, short stories, essays, biographies, monographs – to say nothing of the massive legacy of unpublished manuscripts, the full extent of which I realized only in the last few days (though Walter had warned me): stacks of poems, a correspondence to fill volumes, thick sheafs of lecture notes, and a journal in 62 notebooks begun on November 3, 1952, a few days before he sailed from Genoa in Italy to Canada, and ended on November 28, 1976, a few days before he sailed to a land from which there is no return. Bon voyage, Walter! Farewell!

We will remember you. "The real difference between men is energy," you wrote on another of your slips of paper. (Forgive me if I quote from them so often, but they are the most personal notes he has left: they are messages to himself!) – "A strong will," – this one continues – "a settled purpose, and invincible determination, can accomplish anything: and in this lies the difference between great men and little men." The sheer size of his *opus* demonstrates that Walter had the energy of a great man. But it is the inner life of his work that reaches us now beyond death and its antics. For Walter had "a settled purpose": to affirm over and over again that there is more to admire in man than to despise. It grew from an all-encompassing love and compassion for his fellow-men and blossomed into a generosity of the spirit that came to pervade every line that he wrote, and that binds him to us now and forever as an irreplaceable friend. He was, as he tells us in one of his poems, "at home in faces", and he would write of the genius of Van Gogh with the same deep and glowing warmth with which he would celebrate the endurance of the Old Ukrainian woman on a Toronto streetcar. He extended his friendship to all – the more so the more they suffered. He conceded nothing to despair. He had what Douglas LePan has called "the spirit of courage in the face of meaninglessness". For in a disintegrating age he wrote, "I write *against* the chatter about isolation, about the end of communication, the end of the world, and *in support of* the old human virtues: *dignita, urbanita, umanita*." It is in this firm and simple affirmation of our humanity that I see his real greatness, and its spirit will live after him, and even after all of us have followed him into this mute and awesome enigma. But from the man Walter, we must take our leave, bid farewell to the friend and the teacher, at a time when good friends and good teachers have become rare.

And what a teacher he was! I myself was one of his students many years ago. His personal investment and commitment in the classroom, coupled with the intellectual breadth and vigour of his cosmopolitan mind was an inspiration to students for two decades, and he changed the lives of many. He believed in the young. 'The world belongs to them,' he used to say, 'or it soon will.' And so he devoted himself to guiding them into their own humanity. They have lost as much as we have, for he was their friend too. They are with us in bidding you farewell today, Walter.

You died as unostentatiously as you lived. If there is any consolation in Walter's dying it is that he passed on without pain. He went gently into that mysterious sleep that surrounds our little lives. With that humility which is the hallmark of strong men. Humbleness, humanity, and an indomitable spirit of joyous endurance give his life and work a coherence that made it complete, even though death interrupted him in the middle of an adventure that seemed far from over. Because he was always of a piece. His life was – no, *is* what Milton demanded that a poet's life should be – a poem! And it is with the reading of some of his poems and with the playing of some music by Mozart (whom he loved so dearly) that he asked us to bid him farewell.

Three poems he asked for and three I shall read. The first is from *The Price of Morning*, as he requested, and I shall read it in German, both because I think on this occasion his mother tongue, the language in which almost all his work is written, should be heard – and because I want to remind us of the solitude in which he lived and worked. For 24 years he wrote about his Canadian experiences in a language that most of his friends could not read, cut off from those to whom he most wanted to communicate himself. Thus he became a major Canadian poet, the voice of millions of immigrants, uprooted in their middle years, who live their lives as he did – as exiles at home.

CANADA

Diese Erde beschenkt dich nicht
Mit der Weisheit Platons,
Aristoteles lebte hier nicht
Dante wanderte nicht hier durch das Inferno,
Begleitet vom brüderlichen Virgil.
Und Rembrandt? Nicht hier der Glanz des grossen Herrn
Und dann der betrunkene ungekannte König im Exil.

Andere Weisheit empfängst du hier,
Herb und eisig und nicht bekömmlich für jeden.
Diese Erde sagt:
Ich war hier, lange, ehe du kamst und deinesgleichen,
Ungestört sprach ich mit Winden und Flüssen, vergiss das nicht, Freund. –
Der Wind weht kalt von Labrador:
Ich habe eine Botschaft aus der Eiszeit für dich. –
Aber ich entziffere sie nicht für dich. –
Die Wälder des Nordens rollen wie Wogen:
Wir werden länger dauern als du. –
Yukon und Mackenzie fliessen in ruhiger Geduld:
Sohn, mach es dir nicht zu schwer, andere Zeiten werden nach dir kommen, flüchtiger Fremder. –
Aus der Arktis kommt die Endsumme aller Weisheit:
Schweigen. Nichts weiter: Schweigen. Das Ende der Zeit.

For Walter what mattered in life was the journey itself, not the lodgings along the way. At 72 he was still on that journey, though death cut it short. This year he was making another major break-through, the adventure of writing in a new language, the language of his new home, the language that he came to love. "The language", as he says in an *Interview with an Older Man*, "of my later and last years,

That taught me fresh ways to say things.
The Language that received me as a guest and treated me royally,
Gave me bread and water and other good things.
The language in which I speak to my students,
To friends, to strangers.
The language that generously allowed me
To be at home in it
As a guest, as immigrant, as friend of the world."

Two poems written in English have just appeared in *C V II*, Dorothy Livesay's journal, together with an enthusiastic review by K. Maurer of his poetry in *A Different Sun*. The issue reached me the day before Christmas, too late – alas – for Walter. Before concluding with these first two poems he composed in English and the last two poems (perhaps) that he wrote, I would like to quote one paragraph from the review, just in case his spirit is now hovering about us that he may know he will not be forgotten:

> "Walter Bauer does not take up attitudes and he will not allow the temperature of his language to rise to the consciously "poetic" in the pejorative sense of the phrase: on the contrary, he places himself before his vision and quietly fills his poems with accurate transcriptions of what he *knows* and *sees* and he does so objectively as a man might compile an analysis of statistics. This almost scientific detachment gives his poetry a unique kind of resonance. It evokes the cruel and unredeemed past, it creates the anxious present, it peers into the curvature of man's uncertain future but most of all there is the ever present awareness of Canada in general and Toronto in particular."

And now the poems which are fitting epitaphs to Walter's life and work:

A GRAVE NEVER DISCOVERED

When my life in this world had ended I was not buried like the great ones.
For me there was no tomb with lasting inscriptions on its stone walls,
Praising the great one's merits, and with colourful pictures of
Bird and fish, the harvest of earth, air and water,
So that in the hereafter he could feast upon good things as he had done before.
When my time was over I was buried in a pit and my mourners
Gave me a clay cup for water and a dish for barley bread,
Exactly what I had in life, though it would have been nice
To nibble at a duck or to fry a fish.

But I was not a great one, I was a villager tilling the soil with a hoe and later
With a plow drawn by some cattle; sowing and harvesting was my life.
I was known to my family only and to life-long neighbours,

I hope they have spoken well of me, for
this will help me
In my modest eternal home and then on my
journey.

The seasons of my life were the seasons of
the great river, they never changed.
I knew when the brown waters would come
and rise and
Flood the parched fields after the harvest,
bringing soft muddy silt.
But these waters, where did they come from?
Where did they flow?

Sailors have told us of cataracts
far away and of foreign people,
And the same sailors, returning, spoke
of the river, flowing into a mighty sea.
I have not seen either, but then
it was enough for me
To see the great river
flowing by.
Other travellers, always welcome,
have also spoken of
Lands beyond the desert from where
our enemy came:
Blinding winds, carrying sand that
buried our fields.

I wish there were a great river in
the netherworld, but I don't know
And no one ever has returned
from his last journey.

"I have lived. I have died.
I am barley. I do not pass away."
But it would do me good
to meet the great river again.
The great river, watering the land,
was my life.

TOMB OF ANTIFOKER AT THEBES

Long is the night of immortality for the soul . . .
Everyone has a name, more or less fitting,
But his name was the illustrious name of Antifoker,
At Thebes he was buried and then his soul began
its long journey.

Chancellor of the Northern Region he was, so the
hieroglyphs tell us,
Sole friend of the King,
Grandee of the King of the North; a prince.

Yet no commands anymore, no council,
no obedience,
No laughter, no whisper of love;
No journey anymore on the sunny road of the
great river;
Nothing anymore, for the soul has begun its
journey of immortality

And this journey is long.

Be not afraid, soul, for you have known
of this journey.
Fear not the night of immortality, for if you
are hungry, there will be
Fish from the river, the calmly flowing
giver of life,
Caught by fishermen moving in daylight.
And if after some journeying you need to
rest and eat again, there are
Wild ducks, wild geese, flamingo and ibis,
Harvested in taut nets by men living and
singing and shouting in daylight;
For the soul needs sustenance on its long journey.
Ah! The silvery flash of the fish, the light
on the duck's wing!
Ah! The light rising and wandering and
sinking to rest!
There is nothing better than to walk,
to breathe, to live
Under the living Sun!

But for the soul the night of immortality is long.
Antifoker, bon voyage!

On behalf of all your friends, present and absent – Bon voyage, Walter! Farewell on your long journey through immortality! And as you would say to us I say to your soul: Andiamo, amigo!

Henry Beissel, December 28, 1976